

Strike-breaking or the Refusal of Subalternity?

An Essay on Ethnicity, Class and Gender in Chota Nagpur.

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Introduction¹

Late in August 1939, there took place a strike in a small iron foundry in Jamshedpur, the premiere steel city of colonial India. Its owners were a local Bengali businessman and a Marwari entrepreneur from Calcutta. The workforce consisted of a little over two thousand five hundred workers, most of them *Adivasis* ('tribal' peoples)² and Oriyas, with a few hundred workers from north Bihar and the Gangetic plain. A large proportion - possibly upto 40 percent, were women. The management was known for being arbitrary, even by the notoriously low standards of the capitalists of this young company town. Their workers were low paid, with virtually no security - at the beginning of the year hundreds of hands had been discharged. The President of their union was the charismatic Congressman Abdul Bari, who was also the Deputy Speaker of the Bihar Legislative Assembly. Trouble at the workplace had resulted in spontaneous demonstrations, as was not uncommon in the area in those times. In the ensuing developments the management used their links with the emerging leader of the Adibasi Mahasabha, Jaipal Singh and the Oriya Congressman Nilkantha Das to convince the bulk of their workers to remain at work. They were abetted by Bari's chief rival in Jamshedpur, Maneck Homi, who had led a famous general strike in TISCO in 1928.³ By November the strike had ended and historic developments such as the outbreak of world war, the resignation of provincial Congress ministries nation-wide and the promulgation of emergency regulations in industrial areas, had pushed the plight of the foundry workers into the background of local politics.

¹ This paper was presented to the Association of Indian Labour Historians conference in Delhi, March 2000. It refers to material presented in my book, *The Politics of Labour Under Late Colonialism: Workers, Trade Unions and the State in Chota Nagpur, 1928-1939* (Delhi, 1995), hereafter, *Politics of Labour*). In the following text, *RLEC* denotes the *Report of the Labour Enquiry Commission* (1896), *Rees*, the *Treharne- Rees Report* (1919), *Deshpande*, the *Report on an Enquiry into Conditions of Labour in the Coal Mining Industry in India* by S.R. Deshpande (Delhi, 1946); *GOI*, the Government of India; *RCL*, the Royal Commission on Labour (Calcutta, 1931); *NMML*, the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library; *COI*, the *Census of India* and *BLEC*, the *Report of the Bihar Labour Enquiry Committee* (1940). File references are from the Bihar State Archives, Patna. Those suffixed *NAI* are from the National Archives of India.

² The term *Adivasi* occurs in italics throughout the text, except where quoted by the subjects of the story, who used the version, 'Adibasi'.

³ For more information about TISCO; and these events, see chapters 2, 7 and 9 of *Politics of Labour*

Nevertheless, echoes of that event resounded for some time; in political overtures to Jaipal Singh by the ex-President of the Congress, Subhas Chandra Bose; in the content of Jaipal Singh's speech welcoming Bose to Chota Nagpur; and in the stance of the administration towards union leaders. A close examination of the strike and its aftermath presents interesting questions concerning the delineation of historical episodes and the relative stress to be placed upon their determining elements. Was the strike a case of ethnic identities being used by the management to sabotage working-class unity? Why did prominent local personages such as Bari, Homi, and Jaipal Singh get involved? Why did workers respond to blatant instigation to strikebreaking, and did they have their own agenda? What role did gender issues assume? What was the attitude of the bureaucracy and what was the political significance of the affair? This essay attempts to unravel the layers of meaning that lie beneath the surface of a long-forgotten incident. I will argue that it be treated as the first agitational expression of *Adivasi* sentiment in a working class movement, fuelled in part by long-standing resentment amongst tribal women about the misbehavior of up-country males. Such an interpretation would buttress my argument about the origins of the *Adivasi* estate, because the history of industrialisation and the labour movement in Chota Nagpur is interwoven with ethnic and gender issues. I will begin with the composition of the workforce during the thirties and a summary history of the labour movement in Singhbhum. I will then use juxtapositions from other locales in the area to highlight the importance of the Tatanagar Foundry strike.

Caste and Gender among the Workers of Chota Nagpur

The Chota Nagpur plateau was the cradle of heavy industrialisation in colonial India, the home of coal mining, steel manufacture and many other mining and metallurgical operations. Within Chota Nagpur, the adjacent districts of Singhbhum and Manbhum attracted a polyglot labouring population with a heterogeneous background.⁴ Ethnic factors affected recruitment and job-deployment and often played a significant role in mobilization.⁵ The situation was complicated by historical

⁴ Jamshedpur (also known as Tatanagar) lay in Singhbhum. Manbhum was home to the Jharia coalfield. In 1956 Manbhum was divided into the districts of Dhanbad and Purulia (West Bengal).

⁵ See below, fn. 21

developments in the 1930's and the employment of European executives, foremen and engineers. The presence of white men as better-paid co-workers, or in positions of immediate authority; not to mention British officials, tended to heighten racial and national awareness among the workers of the region.⁶

The Jharia mines began production in 1895. The Tata Iron and Steel Company (TISCO) was founded in 1907, and began production in 1911. The World War occasioned a stable demand for coal and steel: the state's encouragement of Chota Nagpur's industries was with an eye to their strategic import. TISCO devoted nearly all of its capacity to the British war effort.⁷ Jamshedpur was a company town, arising in land acquired under *zamindari* right.⁸ Its municipal services were undertaken by the company and its associates. Steel production rose to 800,000 tons in 1939.⁹ Allied industrial establishments in Jamshedpur included the Tinplate Company, the Cable Company, the Copper Corporation, the Indian Steel and Wire Products Company, the Tatanagar Foundry, and railway workshops, all of which employed 14,352 blue collar workers in 1938.¹⁰

TISCO aimed at stabilising a large skilled workforce in a modern industrial township.¹¹ Jamshedpur had an intermittently employed 'coolie' class recruited in its hinterland and a more stable skilled labour force recruited further afield.¹² The population included a large proportion of non-Bihari immigrants (53.5% in 1931)

⁶ For more information, see fns 30, 49, 55 and 63 below. See also the index entries under 'racial antagonism' and 'racial wage differentials' in *Politics of Labour*

⁷ AK Bagchi, *Private Investment in India*, (Delhi, 1972), pp. 304-306.

⁸ 5.5 square miles of land were acquired in 1909 from the Bengal government under the Land Acquisition Act of 1894 and nearly 20 more from Bihar & Orissa in 1918-20. The land was exempt from the payment of revenue: PC Roy Chaudhury, *Singbhum District Gazeteer*, (Patna, 1958), pp. 293 - 296.

⁹ See chapter 1 of *Politics of labour*

¹⁰ *BLEC*, vol.3-B, Books 1 and 2. All figures exclude clerical and supervisory staff.

¹¹ However, between 1927 and 1938, there was a marked increase in casual employment: *RCL*, vol.4 (1), p. 147; and RK Mukherjee, *The Indian Working Class*, (Bombay 1945), pp. 50-51.

¹² The term 'coolie' denoted the lowest status of manual labourer. Inverted commas have been dispensed with for the remainder of the text.

many of whom were skilled workers.¹³ There were European and American 'covenanted' staff at TISCO, Germans in the Wire Products factory, and Englishmen in the copper mines at Mosaboni (Singhbhum).¹⁴ Semi-skilled workers (*khalasis*) were about equal in number to skilled workers. About half of the unskilled workers were natives of Singhbhum.¹⁵ According to the 1921 census, 22% of Jamshedpur's unskilled workers were *Adivasis*, consisting of *Bhuiyans*, *Bauris*, *Mundas*, *Hos*, *Santhals*, *Oraons*. *Mundas* with 9% were the largest group, Muslims were another 9% and various other service and artisan castes made up 6%.¹⁶ Women coolies (*rezas*) formed 35.6% of the urban unskilled workforce and were the only women in industrial employment. The city's manufactories had a high turnover rate: half its unskilled workforce did not work continuously even for a year.¹⁷ The prolonged periodic absence of many skilled workers led to the gradual stabilization of a reserve of trained workers.¹⁸

In the coalfields, the *Adivasis* accounted for nearly 49% of the 'actual workers' taken as a whole; and together with the 'Depressed Classes' (or so-called 'untouchables') accounted for 87% of those who cut coal.¹⁹ Until 1921, although the number of female coal hewers was small, women comprised nearly half of the coolies, loading and carrying coal above and below ground.²⁰ They formed 38% of *Adivasi* workers and 55% of *Adivasi* coolies. Nearly 90% of the coolies were 'low-caste'. The overall picture is one of a coolie proletariat dominated by tribals, including a large number of women.²¹ But their employment was subject to change. Women constituted 37.5%

¹³ *COI*, 1921, vol 7 (1), p. 105 & 108; vol 7 (2), Table 22 and *RCL*, vol 4 (1), p. 146.

¹⁴ See chapter 1 of *Politics of labour*

¹⁵ *COI*, 1921, vol. 7 (1), p. 279; and *RCL*, vol 4, (1), p. 3 and 4, and *COI*, 1921 vol 7, (2), Table 22.

¹⁶ *COI* 1921, vol 7 (2), Table 22. Since 28% of the skilled and 38% of the unskilled workers were classed as 'unspecified', it is difficult to arrive at a more precise estimate of the distribution of castes.

¹⁷ *RCL*, vol 4 (1), pp. 147 and 15.

¹⁸ *RCL*, vol 4 (1), p. 147, and vol 4 (2), pp. 411-12.

¹⁹ Subsidiary Table 12, in *COI*, 1921, vol 7 (1), chapter 12.

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ Colliery owners explained shortages of labour as a function of competition with Assam tea garden recruitment, and wanted to reserve Chota Nagpur Division for colliery recruitment: See *RCL*, vol 4 (1) p. 212; and *Rees*, p. 78. For more material on ethnicity and recruitment, see Rana Behal and Prabhu

of the workforce in 1920, declining to 25.4% in 1929, the year that the central government ordered their gradual exclusion from underground work. This fell to 13.8% in 1935 and 11.5% in 1938 - a trend linked to mechanisation and the eclipse of family labour - *rezas* were predominantly tribal. A contributory factor was the slump in coal prices in the mid-thirties, and the resultant closures of several small and under-mechanised enterprises.²²

In an economy with a sluggish rate of mechanization, female labour was crucial for industries requiring large amounts of physical energy. Women workers in mining were paid less than males doing the same jobs - in the 1850's they earned two-thirds of the daily wages of male workers and at the height of the overproduction crisis in the mid-1930's, were drawing in some cases less than half the male wage.²³ Their significance for 'unskilled' sectors of the labour process becomes apparent when we consider why the government only banned the employment of women underground a full 90 years after British women were excluded from the pits. Describing the confabulations preceding the passage of the Mines Act of 1923, the author of an official treatise on industrial policy noted that although Government had long possessed the power to do this, "the extent to which coal mining in particular depended on women's labour had stood in the way of action, and the development of the industry which had steadily added to the female labour force had steadily increased the difficulties along the way". This explains why the governments of Bengal, Bihar & Orissa and the Central Provinces considered the measure premature. They agreed with its desirability, "but there was strong opposition to the fixing of a date and an almost entire absence of constructive proposals."²⁴

Mohapatra, "Tea and Money versus Human Life"; Occasional Paper XLIX, (NMML), New Delhi, 1992; Prabhu Mohapatra, "Coolies and Colliers: A Study of the Agrarian Context of Labour Migration from Chota Nagpur, 1880-1920", in *Studies in History*, vol.1 (2), 1985; Simeon, "Jharkhand: Community or Proletariat?", in Nirmal Sengupta (ed.), *Fourth World Dynamics: Jharkhand*, (Delhi, 1982), and *Politics of Labour*, chapter 1

²² RCL, p. 127; BR Seth, *Labour in the Indian Coal Industry*, (Bombay, 1940), pp. 140-141; and Mukerjee, *Working Class*, p. 82. Other statistics on coal miners in British India put the number of women for every ten males at 5.6 in 1915, 6.1 in 1920, 4.8 in 1925, 2.7 in 1930 and 1.6 in 1935, rising to 3.6 in 1944, the year after the ban on female labour underground was lifted temporarily: *Deshpande*, pp. 18-19.

²³ Seth, *Labour...*, p. 138.

²⁴ AG Clow, *The State and Industry - A Narrative of Indian Government Policy in Relation to Industry under the Reformed Constitution*, (Calcutta 1928), pp. 153-155.

Gender influenced assignments as well as remuneration, and was an influential factor for workers as well as management. An enquiry in 1896 reported that men generally refused to carry and load coal - in the case of the up-country miners this created a special difficulty, as many of them came to the coalfields singly, and needed the assistance of women and children of other castes to do their loading. We learn that "Sonthalis in particular are so jealous concerning their women that they will not allow them to carry coal for other coal-cutters."²⁵ A survey in 1924 revealed that nearly 80% of women in the coalfields worked alongside their husbands or male relatives.²⁶ The gendered gradation of work by miners themselves was not an unusual phenomenon – in Britain, prior to 1842, all the carrying work in Scottish mines was done by women and girls, "as miners regarded the jobs too degrading for men".²⁷

The lives of the *rezas* in the mines and on the fringes of factory production were encapsulated within several layers of subalternity. To begin with, they were colonial subjects. As workers they were subject to the general disabilities suffered by the workforce of the region as a whole. As women they were relegated to jobs such as loading, slag-picking and cleaning boilers and were paid less than their male counterparts for doing similar work. And they invariably belonged to the socially stigmatised tribal and low-caste groups, a status which made them easy targets for sexual abuse emanating from up-country male immigrants to the industrial region.²⁸

Labour Relations in Jamshedpur and Singhbhum

We may begin with some observations about the TISCO strike and lockout of 1928.²⁹ Among the interesting features of this movement were the initiatives taken by the

²⁵ *RLEC*, p. 16

²⁶ Seth, *Labour...*, p. 153.

²⁷ Roy Church, *The History of the British Coal Industry, volume 3, 1830-1913, Victorian Pre-eminence*, (Oxford, 1986), p. 191.

²⁸ The tension between tribal women and up-country men lasted far beyond the period under survey. See Radha Kumar, 'Will Feminist Standards survive in Jharkhand?'; and Nirmal Sengupta's fictional sketch, 'Three Women of Chas') in Sengupta, *Fourth World Dynamics*.

²⁹ A detailed account of this strike may be read in chapter 2 of *Politics of Labour*.

semi-skilled workers many of whom were *Adivasis* and Oriyas.³⁰ Some of their meetings were addressed in Santhali (a tribal dialect), and one report quotes the speaker as asking 'Hindus and Muslims' to join the deliberations, a request which brings out the sense of distinctness felt by the tribal population. The observations of a police sub-inspector manifest stereotypes about *Adivasis*. They also underline the capacity of the tribal sections of the workforce to act independently of establishments they viewed as alien to their interests:

The Santhals are most obstinate people and... they may take recourse to violence at any moment, unless they are properly controlled. Most of the strikers are not members of the Labour Association, and moreover do not like to be guided by them. Hari Prasad Singh explained to me (the police officer - DS) that he came to study labour problems and was simply astonished to find the coolies talking sense and fully conscious of their rights.³¹

The *khalasis* of a particular department, including numbers of *Adivasis*, engaged the assistance of a local lawyer named Maneck Homi who helped the strikers formulate their grievances, and was to become the maverick leader of the most prolonged strike in TISCO's history (May-September 1928).³² The strike ended in a settlement mediated by Subhas Chandra Bose and the Congress-affiliated Jamshedpur Labour Association (JLA). Between 1928 and 1931 Bose tried hard to establish himself as the pre-eminent labour leader of Jamshedpur and liked to style himself a 'controller of labour'.³³ The period was witness to bitter struggles between the JLA leadership and Homi's Jamshedpur Labour Federation (JLF). Intricate manoeuvrings amongst

³⁰ File 5/I/28, Special Branch reports, 16 and 17 March 1928. On 16 March 1928, 600 coolies of the Finishing Mills struck work, complaining of rough treatment, abuse and racial discrimination in wages. Labour intensification was the aggravating issue. A police officer remarked that the strikers were "coolies, mostly of the jungly class and some Hindustanis are suspected to be exciting them."

³¹ Ibid. Hari Prasad Singh was a JLA and Town Congress activist.

³² Ibid. Maneck Homi was a pleader and ex-employee. A graduate from Bombay, he visited the USA in the 1920's to study steel manufacturing. Homi was passed over for a post in 1923, and saw his father dismissed from service in 1925. Inspired by pride, intelligence and spite, he won a pyrrhic victory in a vendetta against his fellow-Parsis in TISCO's management. In the late 1930's he made his peace with them and confronted the star unionist of the region, Abdul Bari. More about him may be read in chapter 2 of *Politics of Labour*

³³ "I had some responsibility for controlling labour till the end of January 1929", Subhas Bose said of his activities in Jamshedpur, in a statement to the *Bombay Chronicle* on 11 July 1929.

English officials, Tatas' executives and Homi's political opponents led to a five year jail term for him.³⁴ Matters concerning regional identity also surfaced, due to the fact that many foremen and skilled workers were Bengalis affiliated to the JLA. This union, of which Bose became President, passed into history during the late thirties, when its leading activists joined Abdul Bari, the man deputed by the senior Bihari Congressman Rajendra Prasad to lead Jamshedpur's labour movement.

In September 1934 the activities of two activists considered close to Homi, the dismissed hands Mangal Singh and Phani Bhushan Dutta, disturbed local officials. Both were externed from Jamshedpur on September 20 1934, for "setting up communist cells" and "particularly tampering with aboriginal labour".³⁵ The Deputy Commissioner of Singhbhum reported that:

(Mangal Singh) and Phanindranath Dutta are paying more and more attention to the aboriginal labour in the bastis (residential colonies - DS) rather than attempting to hold public meetings. This action is probably more dangerous and is probably in accordance with instructions from outside. He has shown himself to be a direct active link with outside communist organisations and for this reason he should be removed.³⁶

Mangal Singh's "Worker's Federation of Jamshedpur" was proscribed due to its links with the Workers and Peasants Party of Calcutta. It is significant that the administration considered the spread of radical ideas among the *Adivasi* settlements more dangerous than political rallies.

³⁴ An account of this episode may be read in EM Lavalley, "Pre-Industrial and Industrial Elite Accommodation: Seraikela and Jamshedpur", in Richard Fox (ed), *Realm and Region in Traditional India*, (Delhi, 1977). More details are recounted in chapters 4 and 6 of *Politics of Labour*.

³⁵ Fortnightly Reports (hereafter FR) for September 1934, Home Political, NAI. The Criminal Investigation Department reported that "Mangal Singh appears to have been a comparatively recent convert to communism, and his known followers in Jamshedpur barely number two dozen, the majority of whom are Sikhs with a smattering of Bengalis. He had also made some impression on some 100 aborigines." - File 145/34, letter to the Chief Secretary, 12 October 1934.

³⁶ File 145/34. Commissioner to Chief Secretary, 25 September 1934.

A protest by women workers in late 1934 is also significant. A memorial to the provincial government about the conduct of *goondas* and *dalals* (hooligans and company spies) states:

They (*rezas*) complain that since they all resigned their membership in the Worker's Insurance Society... their immediate superiors... have always been deriding, chiding, and violently scolding them with very obscene language viz. *sali*, *randi*, and *bhoshri** etc. throughout the whole time they work and for this they have been exceedingly disappointed and depressed in their minds...³⁷

The overbearing behaviour of superiors at the workplace was a standing complaint of workers throughout the twenties and thirties, and repeatedly appeared as a motivating factor for protest actions. For the female component of the workforce, however supervisory abuse was only the tip of the iceberg. Many of the offending foremen were Punjabis, and most of the *rezas* must have been *Adivasis* and low-caste women. The abusive admonitions of the supervisors were contemptuous and hurtful. It was Patnaik who drafted the memorial, but he must have been prevailed upon to do so by the offended women, whose feelings he described as disappointment and depression.

Popular Ministries and the Emergence of Ethnic Populism

In the late thirties the workers' mood was drastically affected by the extension of suffrage under the Government of India Act of 1935. On the one hand there was an expectation that with Indians controlling the provincial government they would be able to secure long-standing demands concerning their right to choose their leaders, against intensified work processes, for improved working conditions, better remuneration, and protection against the widespread practice of whimsical dismissals. There was a wave of unrest, with lightning strikes often called to resist instances of perceived injustice. Some workers, especially the miners, would launch strikes without formulating any demands.³⁸

³⁷ File 15/34. Resolution, 30 October 1934; and Memorial, 3 November 1934, signed by PP Patnaik.

* *Sali* denotes familiarity, but is derogatory when used outside an intimate relationship, *randi* means whore, and *bhoshri* refers to the female genitals.

³⁸ For example, in the miners' strike at Badruchak collieries run by Bird and Co., in September, 1938: File 379/39.

The advent of democratic politics also deepened the awareness of ethnic and regional identities within the labour movement. For example territorial disputes over Singhbhum and Manbhum had plagued relations between Bihari, Oriya and Bengali Congressmen for over a decade.³⁹ This had affected radical nationalists (including many labour organisers) such as Jadumani Mangraj, Parliamentary Secretary from Orissa, who visited the Moubhandar copper works in May 1939, and combined fiercely nationalist speeches with advocacy for Oriya unity and the attachment of Singhbhum to Orissa.⁴⁰ The politics of an ethnic identity for the districts of southern Bihar dated from the beginning of the century. The latest of a series of tribal rebellions had been led by Birsa Munda at the turn of the century, leaving reverberations during the national movement, with popular folk songs linking Gandhi and Birsa.⁴¹ The 'Santal disturbance' in Mayurbhanj in 1917 had required troops to quell it.⁴² The Tanabhat movement and no-tax campaign of the *Oraons* in the 1920's was affected by nationalist non-cooperation. The Haribaba movement among the *Ho's* in the 1930's proclaimed Swaraj and the victory of 'Gandhi Mahto'.

Pan-tribal sentiment began to be organised in 1912, with educational scholarships being raised by the Chotanagpur Charitable Association.⁴³ The Chotanagpur Improvement Society formed in 1916 by the Anglican Bishop of Ranchi represented a tribal aspiration for educational and social reform. From 1918 the Society began propagating tribal identity, and re-named itself the Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj in 1920. In 1938, the Samaj initiated the formation of the Adibasi Mahasabha. Rai Bahadur Sarat Chandra Roy, who had studied the *Mundas* and who was a member of the provincial Legislative Council, had pleaded in the late 1920's for a separate 'aborigine' political entity in the form of a province, or as part of Orissa.⁴⁴

³⁹ As early as 1925, the Utkal (Orissa) Congress claimed Singhbhum as part of its jurisdiction: *All India Congress Committee Papers*, NMML, File 2 of 1925.

⁴⁰ File 314/39. Singhbhum police report, 29 May 1939.

⁴¹ KS Singh, *Tribal Society in India: An Anthro-Historical Perspective*, (New Delhi, 1985), p. 194.

⁴² *ibid*, p. 135.

⁴³ *ibid*, p. 199-201.

⁴⁴ *ibid*, Chapter 6: "Colonialism and Anthropologists", p.104-118. The administrator cum anthropologist, JH Hutton recommended the exclusion of 'aboriginal' areas from the purview of the

The ideal of an *Adivasi* identity had become a live issue among the tribal workers of Chota Nagpur by the mid 1930's. As the issue became mixed up with the ambitions of the Bengali and Oriya interventionists in the region, the debates became ugly. In November 1938 the provincial Congress mouthpiece *Searchlight* praised the Bihar government's annual sojourn in Ranchi as a move which had "confounded... the enemies of Bihar who have been conspiring against her territorial integrity by promoting the utterly spurious agitation for the separation of Chota Nagpur".⁴⁵ Jimutbahan Sen, Bihar's disaffected Bengali Congressman, criticised the "unsympathetic attitude of the Congress Government towards the aborigines", and the habit of abusing missionaries and 'Christian aboriginals'.⁴⁶

Maneck Homi began raising the 'aborigine' question after his release from jail in late 1935. This was an adaptation to the changed political environment, and the growing ethnic awareness of the tribal population. The occasion was a strike in the Indian Steel and Wire Products Company (ISWP) owned by Sardar Bahadur Indra Singh, who employed some German covenanted staff.⁴⁷ The union complained to the Bihar Labour Enquiry Committee about favouritism, intensified workloads and compulsory leave.⁴⁸ It also described the punishments meted out to workers:

In the Rod Mill the procedure is yet more whimsical and unjust. For nothing the German Officers would ask a man to go home without any kind of inquiry.

contemplated constitutional reforms. KS Singh believes that Roy represented the Bengali elite of Chota Nagpur who were unhappy with the separation of Bihar from Bengal. The links between Chota Nagpur's Bengalis, Oriya politicians and the *Adivasi* question were to emerge once more in the Foundry strike.

⁴⁵ *Searchlight*, 5 November 1938. Editorial entitled "Must Strike With Rapidity". The editor attacked 'the Bengali Babus', 'men of the Gospel' and the zamindars, for acting as 'paid agents to foment mischief among the credulous aborigines' on behalf of the 'white officials.'

⁴⁶ Valmiki Choudhary, (ed), *Dr Rajendra Prasad: Correspondence and Select Documents*, (Delhi, 1984) vol. 3; p. 63-66. Letter from Jimutbahan Sen, 9 May 1939.

⁴⁷ *BLEC*, vol. 3-B, Book 1, p. 455. There were 641 skilled workers and 1283 'coolies and rezas' (242 *rezas*) in 1938. Most coolies were *Adivasis*, and most skilled workers, Punjabis.

⁴⁸ *BLEC*, vol. 3-C, p. 110-118. The union cited a job which required four hours to perform, after which workers would be placed on compulsory leave. Thus the management was deducting half of their wages.

They would not even ask the Time Office to give the `check' back. If one insists, one would be cursed, threatened, and even pushed out.⁴⁹

On August 2 1937, 250 coolies and *rezas*, mostly *Ho* tribals, went on lightning strike over discriminatory bonus.⁵⁰ Apart from some *rezas* throwing stones at a lorry, the protest was peaceful. The few Punjabis who were called in to replace the strikers refused to join after seeing the nature of the work.⁵¹ No grievances were presented and the strikers depended entirely on Homi's guidance.⁵² The `backward' members of the workforce were once again taking the initiative and turning to experienced unionists to lead them. The management enrolled Punjabi and Pathan counter-pickers, and police intervention was required to prevent clashes. *Rezas* were especially militant in this strike. On August 9 the union presented demands which concerned increments, piece rates, dismissals and bonus. The *rezas* demanded maternity benefits and a rest-room for women. The second grievance on the list was that "no chance of promotion is given to aboriginals, preference being given to Oriyas, Babus, and Punjabis".⁵³

The 1937 ISWP strike ended in a stalemate, with Abdul Bari helping to defuse the situation. The owner had Congress links and regional Congressmen were keen to erode Homi's influence. Thereafter Homi lost ground and his new union, the JLF-1936 assumed a conciliatory role. Ethnicity was to play an important role in union activity at the Wire Products factory. The battle lines drawn at this stage were to re-emerge at other locations over the next two years and with great poignancy in the Foundry strike.

Multiple Identities in the Jamshedpur Trade Unions

⁴⁹ *BLEC*, vol. 3-C, p. 111.

⁵⁰ File 10-III/37. Strike Report 1; 2 August 1937. The scheme offered unskilled workers half the bonus available for skilled workers. Most had taken the bonus, but a section had refused it on Homi's advice.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* A similar situation had arisen in the Tatanagar Foundry, where Punjabi hands refused to work as blacklegs because of the low wages offered. (10-II/37, Strike Report 5; 13 July 1937.

⁵² *Ibid.* Strike Report 2; 3 August 1937.

⁵³ *Ibid.* Strike Report 5; 9 August 1937.

1938 was the year of an unprecedented upsurge in the labour movement. It was also the year of Bari's pre-eminence. He was by then the President of seven unions,⁵⁴ and led some tense confrontations in foreign-owned plants. During the unrest at the Indian Copper Corporation mines (Mosaboni), and works (Moubhandar) in Singhbhum, an English engineer was assaulted and tensions over race and nationality erupted repeatedly. Thus, while condemning the company doctor for neglecting sick strikers, speakers at workers' meetings said of him that he was "born of a European father and has got worst mentality than the real Sahibs".⁵⁵ Here, as in many other cases, the Englishmen tended to identify 'trouble-makers' (or 'excitable' elements) by their ethnic/regional identities - in June the management dismissed "about 100 Madrasis including all labour leaders".⁵⁶ The British Director Sir Geoffrey Fell wired the local administration:

(management)... will not deal now or in future with any union of which Abdul Bari is officer... some of worst characters chiefly madrasedee will not be reemployed.. this is essential condition and we should prefer to close down...⁵⁷

Despite official platitudes about "factionalism within labour", at critical moments workers could and did collect in their union.⁵⁸ Nonetheless, their other identities remained intact. South-Indian workers grouped together, within the union or through other bodies - this tendency was also apparent among Punjabis and 'Madrasis' in TISCO. The Nepalis (or Gurkhas) used clan networks in matters of employment and residence.⁵⁹ These groups could splinter on strategic issues. For example, militants within the "Madras party" had formed a so-called Cosmopolitan

⁵⁴ The Tata Workers Union, one of two unions in the Copper Corporation, the Golmuri Tinplate Workers Union, unions in the Cable Company and the ISWP, the Tatanagar Foundry union, and a coal miners' union in Jharia.

⁵⁵ File 110-II/38. Criminal Investigation Department (C.I.D.) report; 27 June 1938.

⁵⁶ File 110-II/38. Deputy Commissioner's (hereafter DC) letter; 29 June 1938.

⁵⁷ File 110-II/38. DC's letter; 20 June 1938.

⁵⁸ File 314/39. Commissioner Chota Nagpur, to Chief Secretary; 17 May 1939.

⁵⁹ *BLEC*, vol. 4-C, p. 155. This was noticed by officials as well as the union, which stated: "In matters of recruitment, Nepalis are given preference. Nepalis form the great bulk of the working population in the (copper) mines. The management stated that 32.1% of the miners were Nepalis. Their proportion in works and mines together amounted to 23.5%. Also see *BLEC*, vol. 3-B, Book 1, p. 396, and 417.

Club.⁶⁰ Moubhandar also saw the formation of a Muslim League branch that the union alleged was made up of the company's *goondas*.⁶¹

However, more mundane aspects of daily life brought workers together. "It is notorious", said the Police Superintendent, "that on Sundays the whole population of Aborigines and Sikhs of Mosaboni and Moubhandar drink heavily in the liquor shops."⁶² Despite ethnic distinctions workers showed a capacity to lend broad (though not unanimous) support for movements directed against arrogant managements. This was so in most of the strikes in the region during 1937-39. The one instance when ethnic identity disrupted a strike was at the Foundry.

In the midst of the working class upsurge European managements took the initiative to form a combine. This was remarked upon by Vidya Bhushan Shukla, Assistant Secretary to the BLEC, in a letter to Rajendra Prasad in June:

The lockout in the Tinsplate Company here, as you know, was declared about a month and a half ago. About 60% of the workers have left for their homes and now the management with the help of Mr Homi wants to restart the works. They have employed a number of goondas to intimidate the peaceful workers... The strike situation at Musaboni also is not improving... Almost all the European employers are determined to crush any organisation of the workers, especially Prof. Bari is, at present, their target. In spite of the Congress Government, I am sorry to say, the European managements are getting all sorts of help in order to crush the worker's movement. It is the manager of the Tinsplate Company, Mr Leyshon, who is leading the organised

⁶⁰ File 314/39. "Malcontents who it seems are being incited to violence are chiefly the Madrasis" : Singhbhum police report; 11 May 1939.

⁶¹ Ibid, Singhbhum police reports; 15 and 29 May 1939. The Copper Corporation Worker's Union told the police that most Muslims were against it. The formation of the branch related to conflict over the selection of the Pesh Imam of the local mosque. The supporters of the current incumbent had formed the League, and also supported Homi's JLF-1936. 336 of 1800 workers at Moubhandar and 429 of 3669 at Mosaboni were Muslims (*BLEC*, vol. 3-B, Book 1, p. 396). There is no evidence that they were League sympathisers. At Mosaboni the local Maulvi was establishing himself as a League leader, his preferred vehicle being the Quadiani sect.

⁶² Ibid, Singhbhum police report; 27 July 1939.

employers. I am glad to say that the Tatas and other Indian concerns are at present keeping aloof.⁶³

Indian managements and the ministry were equally alarmed by the radicalism of the workers. Bari's fiery rhetoric dismayed the Tatas and senior Bihar Congressmen, who took steps to have his speeches recorded verbatim. Bari was not averse to using ethnic sentiment in his diatribes against TISCO management before they agreed to recognise his union. On one occasion he referred to its executives as being "Parsee *loundas** like Kutar", who wanted to drive him from Jamshedpur.⁶⁴ On another, he referred to TISCO as "not a national industry but pure and simple a Parsi industry".⁶⁵ But whereas Bari's position in the Congress and his proximity to Rajendra Prasad helped him emerge as the main mediator in TISCO, Indian employers of lesser stature often found themselves at a loss when dealing with labour militancy. It was in this atmosphere that other forms of populism began to play a role in the politics of labour.

Subhas Bose, Abdul Bari, and the Tata Centenary

Another strand in the story is represented by the conflict between Abdul Bari and Subhas Bose over a boycott of the Tata Centenary celebrations in March 1939, an issue that was to embroil the nationalist leadership until August. (After this crisis Bari emerged as the established mediator in TISCO). From 1930 onwards, the company had celebrated the birthday of its founder on March 3 with festoons, fireworks and a march by uniformed workers. "What was originally intended as a voluntary demonstration became in course of time, a compulsory duty".⁶⁶ In 1939 TISCO arranged an elaborate occasion for Jamshetji Tata's birth centenary. (This

⁶³ *Rajendra Prasad Papers*, (hereafter RPP), NAI, File 1-S-38, Vidya Bhushan Shukla to Rajendra Prasad, 14 June 1938.

⁶⁴ File 201/38. Intelligence report quoted in DC's letter to Bari; 17 May 1938. **Lounda* is an offensive colloquialism for 'boy'. PK Kutar was a Superintendent of the Rolling Mills, notorious as an arch *dalal* (agent) and fixer of *goondas*. On 13 May, Bari denounced TISCO's General Manager for being a "*badmash, shaitan, dhokhabaz*", ("rascal, satan, betrayer") who deserved to be thrown out of the country along with the Englishmen.

⁶⁵ Ibid, Proceedings of meeting; 29 May 1938. Bari returned to the 'national' theme later in the year, over the issue of an foreman who intimidated a worker for coming to work in a Gandhi cap: Police report of labour meeting held on 13 November 1938.

⁶⁶ Moni Ghosh, *Our Struggle*, (Calcutta, 1973), p 47.

was the time of year that the issue of the annual bonus came up). Bari denounced this as a *tamasha**, and meetings were held to discuss a boycott. Just before the festivities a foreman assaulted a worker for refusing to help with decorations. This led to a flash strike in two departments.⁶⁷ Three workers were suspended and the celebrations were disrupted after the first day.⁶⁸

On April 1, 1939 Bose commented upon these 'wrong tactics'. He was at the time embroiled in the controversy arising from his re-election as Congress President on January 29 and the subsequent rebuff delivered to him at the Tripuri session of the Congress in mid-March.⁶⁹

I was delighted beyond measure when I found Mr Bari taking so much interest in the cause of Jamshedpur labour.. he is bold, upright, honest.. During the last few months on two occasions I was able to help in bringing about a settlement. ..On both occasions I found the attitude of Sir A R Dalal to be conciliatory... (but), instead of doing the right thing and persuading the workers to do the right thing Mr Bari began to show a tendency to submit to whatever the workers said whether it was right or wrong.. This was one of the fatal defects in Mr Homi.. Matters came to a head in February last when Mr Bari publicly announced that the workers would boycott the Centenary celebrations of the founder of Jamshedpur...In a country like India where Trade Unionism is still in its infancy, we who call ourselves Trade Unionists have a great responsibility in the matter of guiding the workers along right lines... It was the duty of the workers as also of the Management to pay homage to the memory of India's premier industrialist who built a modern industrial city out of the jungle and provided them all with bread.

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 48. Correspondence between Bari and Rajendra Prasad later in the year indicates that the incident involved peremptory behaviour by a supervisor. **Tamasha* - 'a public performance', in this case, with a hypocritical connotation.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p 47. The *Searchlight* (9 March 1939) reported the functions coming to an end on 4 March. The paper stated its hope that reports of a boycott were baseless, because "Sir Jamshetji Tata's is a hallowed name in India".

⁶⁹ For details of the developments during this crucial period, see Leonard Gordon, *Brothers Against the Raj*, (New York, 1990), pp. 369-440. For an analysis of the political crisis see Bhagwan Josh, *Struggle For Hegemony in India, vol. II*, (New Delhi, 2011); chapter 11, "The Divided Left".

Bose recalled that in late February Bari had come to see him in Calcutta:

Mr Bari admitted that his policy was wrong but he regretted that he had proceeded too far to withdraw.. Subsequently I heard that the boycott was carried out.. Let us not consciously or unconsciously imitate any of the tactics of Mr Homi. Let us be honest and straightforward and build up our Trade Unionism on the right principles. Only then shall we be able to fight successfully both the employers and the Government and our cause that is the cause of the workers will be sure to triumph in the long run.⁷⁰

Bose's latest intervention in TISCO affairs took place less than three years after he had accused the management of using *goondas* to liquidate the trade-union movement in Jamshedpur and flaunting nationalism as "an excuse for robbing the public".⁷¹ (Which is what Bari insisted was still going on). After becoming Congress President the first time Bose became less strident. In February 1938 he told the Indian Merchant's Chamber in Bombay that "productive capitalists were not reactionaries", and that Congress and private enterprise needed to co-operate.⁷² His remonstrance of Bari seemed to be a political gesture towards conciliation with those whom he had previously dubbed rightists and compromisers.

Bari's response was swift. He was pained that he had not been consulted before the criticisms were published. It had become:

the policy of the Tatas to disregard completely the status of a union which is not of their own making... Those who are not acquainted with the real object and procedure of these celebrations are not only not aware of the compulsion, drill, and regimentation introduced therein, but also of the direct and indirect manner in which the celebrations are used for weaning away the allegiance of workers from the fundamental issues of trade-unionism... To compare our

⁷⁰ *Searchlight*, 2 April 1939.

⁷¹ In his essay "Labour in Jamshedpur", in J.S. Bright, *Important Speeches and Writings of Subhas Bose*, (Lahore, 1946). The essay is dated 31 December 1935.

⁷² *Searchlight*, 2 March 1938.

attitude and methods.. with Mr Homi's, as Subhas Babu has done, is to add insult to injury.. he has done great harm to the cause of labour for we are just now in the midst of a tense situation (and).. the management can for once become sure of politically influential support.. A word regarding the labour association. This organisation... was absolutely dead and defunct in spite of the best intentions of Subhas Babu for the last eight or nine years... When I started my organisational activities at Jamshedpur Subhas Babu's organisation could not claim to have even a dozen regular members on the rolls..⁷³

Meanwhile, the BLEC conducted its hearings,⁷⁴ and on April 5 the management and Bari agreed to arbitration by Rajendra Prasad and Jawaharlal Nehru.⁷⁵ By the end of April Bose had resigned his hard-won position as Congress President. In May Bari's political mentor became the interim President and the thwarted Bose founded his Forward Bloc. In prolonged negotiations TISCO obtained the intervention of Congress leader Sardar Patel to obtain a compromise with Bari.⁷⁶ On July 22 Rajendra Prasad reported that the matter had been settled:

Prof Bari has assured me that he will not countenance any strike and will rather oppose it if anyone else tries to create trouble on account of the award. They have also agreed that there should be conciliation... I am hoping that if this thing shapes well then Professor Bari's Union will get strength and there will be peace in the industry... if he is once convinced that the Company is going to deal fairly with him he will be a very strong supporter of the Company. So if you happen to meet any of the big people of the Company you can impress upon them the desirability of fair and square dealing with him. We are trying to settle somewhat difficult situation and both sides have to act

⁷³ *Searchlight*, 5 April 1939.

⁷⁴ *Searchlight*, 4 April 1939. Bari was a member of the Committee.

⁷⁵ *Searchlight*, 6 April 1939.

⁷⁶ After meeting Bari, Patel wrote to Prasad: "My contact with Mr Bari has given an impression that he has put his heart into the labour question and although it is true that he is inexperienced and hasty, he is thoroughly honest and can be fully trusted". *RPP*, NAI, File 1-C-39, Letter from Vallabbhai Patel to Rajendra Prasad; 7 July 1939

fairly by each other. I am trying to impress this upon Professor Bari. You will also please write to him.⁷⁷

The 'Aboriginal Question' in the Labour Movement

Abdul Bari had finally been accepted as the new "controller of labour" in TISCO, something that Bose had tried to be in the preceding years. The top leadership of the Congress had a great deal to do with this denouement and there is little doubt that for them, one of Bari's valuable attributes was his antipathy to rivals in general and Bose in particular. Before the year was out Bari was to be valued for his moderation. Realising that he was being sidelined, Homi now submitted demands designed to safeguard the position of his union and for "special considerations in matters relating to indigenous or aborigine (sic) labour". The *Adivasis* now entered (passively, thus far) Homi's campaign to resist the Bari-Congress hegemony over Jamshedpur labour.⁷⁸ That ethnic grievance in the labour movement was already politically charged became evident on May 18, when Rajendra Prasad cited the alleged discrimination against 'aboriginals' in promotions at TISCO.⁷⁹

What was the 'aboriginal question'? Jaipal Singh, a Christian *Munda* from Ranchi, had offered his 'services' to the Bihar ministry in 1938 hoping to be appointed a minister, but had been rebuffed. Three days before the Second Adibasi Mahasabha (January 19-21, 1939),⁸⁰ he informed Prasad that he had "now been recognised as the natural leader of the Adibasis", and was eager to use his 'weight' to make his people

⁷⁷ At a joint meeting between Bari; TISCO's Ardeshir Dalal and J J Ghandy; and Bihar ministers Binodanand Jha, A N Sinha, Srikrishna Sinha (the Premier), and K B Sahay. *RPP*, NAI, File 1-C-39, Letter from Rajendra Prasad to Vallabhbhai Patel; 22 July 1939.

⁷⁸ *RPP*, NAI, File 1-A-39, Letter; 24 April 1939, from Maneck Homi to Rajendra Prasad, forwarding his correspondence with management, and letter to J J Ghandy; 3/5/39.

⁷⁹ Choudhary, *Dr Rajendra Prasad*, vol. 3, p. 81. Quoting a complaint he had received about the "importations of Bihari labour as mates", Prasad asked the General Manager to "please look into the matter and let me know the position as it stands, particularly what foundation there is for the statement that since the introduction of Labour Welfare Officer at Jamshedpur aboriginals are not appointed as mates and Biharis are getting these jobs. I am sure the Company would not like to discriminate against aboriginals." The GM replied denying the charge (7 June 1939, p. 115), but did not give a community-wise break-up of the 100 mates working in TISCO.

⁸⁰ Jaipal Singh had been educated by missionaries, studied at Oxford and became the Indian hockey captain in the 1928 Olympiad. See P.G. Ganguly, "Separatism in the Indian Polity - A Case Study", in M.C. Pradhan, (ed), *Anthropology and Archaeology*, (New Delhi, 1969), pp. 53, and 74-75. For further information see chapter 2 of *The Dynamics of Tribal Leadership in Bihar*, LP Vidyarthi and KN Sahay, (Allahabad, 1978).

work within the Congress. In February, he complained about the treatment he had received.⁸¹ In May he talked about self-determination and criticised the "indirect employment of labour", expressing the hope that the Bihar Labour Enquiry Committee would "materially offer greater protection to the unskilled workers".⁸² Soon afterwards he demanded *Adivasi* representation in the Committee and gave Prasad a list of grievances in his capacity as President of the Mahasabha. He concluded :

There is a genuine feeling throughout the Province that only Biharis matter now. I am making this statement.. after a careful study of what is going on with regard to the employment in areas like Tatanagar.. the Indian National Congress is sadly failing in its duty to the backward areas by neglecting them.. The Bihar Ministry is doing all it can to destroy self-determination of the Adibasis. The basest motives are attributed to us. For centuries we have been plundered and we had hoped the Indian National Congress would have helped us move forward to take our station of honour in the national life of India.⁸³

'Self-determination' for Chota Nagpur was an ideological reflex of the social disruption caused by industrialisation and the problem of employment. *Adivasis* formed the bulk of the coolies and *rezas* of the industrial areas. Jaipal Singh's intervention in labour disputes was part of a political struggle against the hegemonic posture of Abdul Bari, the Congress' strongest representative in Jamshedpur, but it was grounded in the sense of deprivation felt by the tribals. The strategy of the *Marang Gomke* (Supreme Leader) was to demonstrate his popularity amongst tribal workers by appealing to them to abstain from participation in labour disputes. In his

⁸¹ Choudhary, *Dr Rajendra Prasad*, vol. 3. Letters from Jaipal Singh; 16 January 1939 and 1 February 1939: "I have always been and shall remain an ardent lover of the Congress principles. My wife is the grand-daughter of the first President of the Indian National Congress (WC Bonnerjee) and with this background my Bihari friends ought to have the commonsense to realise that I could never be persuaded to be otherwise than a Congressman. The Congress and the Bihar Ministry are not the same thing... If they can treat *shabbily* a man of my unusual antecedents and remarkable record, one whose services to the country are recognised, what do you think an ordinary Adibasi can expect from the Bihari Ministry?"

⁸² Ibid, letter from Jaipal Singh; 14 May 1939.

⁸³ Ibid. Letter from Jaipal Singh; 24 May 1939, pp. 95-97. The issues raised included education, irrigation, labour and representation. He also demanded an investigation into "the recent propaganda of the Bihar Congress against Christian missions."

tours of the area in mid-1939, he advised *Adivasis* in Moubhandar, Mosaboni and Kheruadih to avoid union activity and establish a separate union.⁸⁴ He was to make further interventions in labour disputes involving Bari before the year was out.

The Case of Tatanagar Foundry

The Foundry dispute exemplified the complex nature of labour unrest in Chota Nagpur. The strikes in the small metallurgical factories had exposed the complacency of their owners. The Foundry had experienced unrest during the first Congress ministry. The intensification of labour here and in the Wire Products factory was remarked upon by their unions in statements to the BLEC. Compulsory leave kept two-thirds of the Foundry workers unemployed for part of the year or for a part of the working day. Both in the coalfields and in factories, workers could be suspended or dismissed without a charge-sheet. Insecure service was a means of transferring to the workers the liabilities of market fluctuations and inefficient management. Nonetheless, the Foundry's manager often complained about the irregularity of his workers.

The Foundry was established in 1927 and owned by Jagannath Agarwala and NN Rakshit. In 1938 it employed 1925 workers of whom 64% were unskilled, (including 727 women).⁸⁵ 74% of the workers were from Bihar & Orissa. It supplied cast-iron sleepers to the Railway Board, its chief customer. The manager called it a "seasonal industry", with a "more intimate and much less formal" relationship with its workforce.⁸⁶ There were no service or leave rules, and no security of service, sick leave, Provident Fund, school, housing or rules of conduct.⁸⁷ Everyone except the supervisors was on daily wages on the ground of 'irregularity'.⁸⁸ Wage rates were the lowest in the district and between 60 to 75% of the workforce was on compulsory

⁸⁴ File 314/39. Singhbhum police report; 27 July 1939.

⁸⁵ *BLEC*, vol. 3-B, Book 2, p. 156.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 147.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 148-152. Rakshit told the BLEC: "Our relation with our workers was always friendly and we had no occasion to treat them very harshly. As there are no rules of conduct, stray and individual cases are dealt with according to the common-sense view of justice and fairplay."

⁸⁸ *Ibid*. During the 1937 strike, there were 302 monthly paid workers: File 10-II/37, Strike Report 11; 21 July 1937.

unpaid leave with no guarantee of re-employment for two months every year when orders were slack. Appointments and dismissals were "according to necessity and sweet will". The factory was ill-lit and nocturnal accidents common. There were no rest rooms, creches or tiffin-room. Water supply was inadequate and the 500 contractor's workers were sometimes not paid at all.⁸⁹ Women did not have a lavatory or rest-room and enjoyed no maternity benefits or paid leave.

Between July and August 1937 Maneck Homi led a strike over these grievances.⁹⁰ This ended in a stalemate and a small wage increase for the coolies. The following year, the Tatanagar Foundry Workers' Union (TFWU) was 're-organised' under Bari's leadership. It continued to press for its standing demands.⁹¹ In mid-1938 Rakshit outraged his workers with a statement deploring the insensitivity of labour leaders to the miserable plight of the locked-out workers of the Tinplate and Cable companies. His blatant hypocrisy led to a slowdown and a threat of closure.⁹² Throughout August, the union discussed intensification. Eventually, negotiations convened by the Deputy Commissioner led to a tentative agreement on a small wage increase.⁹³ In September 1938 after another strike, conciliation was agreed upon along with an increase of 10% and an assurance of union recognition once it was registered.⁹⁴ Rakshit's 'informal' relationship with his workers was coming to an end. The award of 14 December 1938, signed by Rakshit and Bari included provisions for security of service, profit sharing bonus, general increment, a grievance machinery and a Provident Fund.⁹⁵ None of these were implemented. In March 1939 Rakshit told the BLEC: "I am not prepared to introduce anything unless I get better

⁸⁹ *BLEC*, vol. 3-C, p. 162-170.

⁹⁰ File 10-II/37.

⁹¹ *BLEC*, vol 3-C, p.162.

⁹² *Searchlight*, 19 July 1938; and FR's for August 1938. This is the only case I know of workers protesting insincerity by a manager.

⁹³ *Searchlight*, 1 September 1938 and *Advance*, 31 August 1938.

⁹⁴ File 385/38. Terms of Settlement, Tatanagar Foundry, 16 September 1938; and DC's letter, 17 September 1938. *Searchlight*, 15 and 18 September 1938; *Statesman*, 16 September 1938.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, SK Das, Secretary to the Board of Conciliation, to Chief Secretary; 14 December 1938. The report commended the "reasonable and accommodating spirit displayed" by Rakshit and Bari.

service". Around this time, 1100 Foundry workers lost their jobs.⁹⁶ At the end of the year Rakshit was to attain new heights in the political handling of labour disputes.

The Foundry was re-started in April 1939. The management complained about a 25% to 30% reject rate in the Moulding Department (compared to 15% before the formation of the trade-union), and of the sullenness of the workers ever since the Arbitrator's rejection of their demand for a 25% increment. By this time there were 2528 workers in the Foundry - 1736 *Adivasis*, 530 Oriyas and 262 'others'; a 31% increase in the first two categories since 1938. Nearly 90% were from Bihar and Orissa as compared to 74% previously. (Although figures for the female component of the workforce in this new phase are not available, we may assume that the proportion was comparable to the 35 to 40 percent norm in labour-intensive occupations). The management had clearly decided to alter the ethnic composition of its workforce. Mid-August saw violent tension between supervisors and workers, the bitterness exacerbated by the fact that some union ex-officials had been made supervisors. But the discharges and fresh hirings of the past months had affected the union's popularity - attendance at its annual meeting on August 27 was only 160, with most Oriyas and *Adivasi* workers absenting themselves.⁹⁷

On August 29 two union activists were suspended for negligence, and two others for organising a lightning strike in protest. 66 men of the Furnace department were dismissed on the 31st for striking on the 30th, and shouting "labour and socialist slogans" inside the works. Six men were arrested in the premises for intimidation.⁹⁸ In his letter to the Premier, the union Vice-President JN Mitra complained of "unprecedented repression" and management's attempts to sow "dissension and division". Meanwhile Nilkantha Das, President of the Orissa Pradesh Congress Committee and "a close friend of the Management" had addressed Oriya workers and

⁹⁶ *BLEC*, vol.4-B, pp. 239, 245. In June 1938, 1300 men had been discharged due to a shortage of raw material. Bari's allies, VB Shukla, JN Mitra and Michael John met the manager and helped convince the workers of the inevitability of retrenchment, and a formula which included leave without pay, and reinstatement when supplies were available: First FR for July 1938, & *Searchlight*, 28 June 1938.

⁹⁷ File 506/39. DC to Commissioner, 29 September 1939. In mid-October, the number of subscribing members of the Union (as yet unregistered), was about 200 and Homi was claiming that over 900 *Adivasi* workers had joined the Federation: First Confidential Strike Report filed by DC, 16 October 1939.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, DC to Commissioner.

asked them to work "loyally under the present service conditions". Meanwhile Jadumoni Mangoraj and PK Mohanty had started the Tatanagar Foundry Oriya Association. "The simple Oriya workers thus led astray", said Mitra, "began to agitate for their exclusive appointment." The next day:

Mr Jaypal Singh, President of the Adibasi Sabha made his sudden appearance on the scene and held a meeting of the Adibasi workers. Another instalment of racial rivalry was skilfully administered. It is needless to mention here that Mr Jaypal Singh as usual stayed here as a guest of the Company... Management are actively encouraging other rival bodies, both on political and racial lines.⁹⁹

The union meeting on September 1 was attended by about 200 workers. Resolutions were passed denouncing the flotation of "racial and communal unions", and the non-implementation of the settlement of the Conciliation Board. Notice was issued of a strike in case the dismissed persons were not reinstated.¹⁰⁰ Subsequent meetings attracted a similar attendance and on September 15 another worker was suspended. Congress and red flags were shown at the main gate amidst calls for a strike. There was an immediate *hartal** in the Casting Department, and the Works Manager dismissed 26 hands on the spot and had them removed by the police.¹⁰¹ The following day, 174 workers were dismissed for demonstrating inside the factory. Picketing began on the 18th, with violent obstruction at some places.

Numbers of *rezas* now began to be escorted into the plant by *Adivasi* men shouting slogans against the picketers. Jaipal Singh arrived and asked *Adivasis* not to join the strike.¹⁰² "The Adibasi labourers who were escorting loyal workers including *rejas*

⁹⁹ Ibid, Notes. JN Mitra's letter to Premier, 29 September 1939. The DC reported that Nilkantha Das, Jadumoni Mangoraj and Jaipal Singh had stayed as guests of NN Rakshit, and that Jaipal Singh had asked *Adivasis* not to attend any meetings except those of the Sabha: DC to Commissioner, 29 September 1939.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, Resolutions of the TFWU; 1 September 1939, and DC to Commissioner; 29 September 1939.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, DC to Commissioner; 29 September 1939. **hartal* - cessation of work.

¹⁰² Ibid, Strike Report 1, 19 September 1939; and DC to Commissioner, 29 September 1939.

were also shouting their slogans asking workers to come to work".¹⁰³ These methods were the first explicit attempt in Chota Nagpur by an owner to counter union activity through political mobilisation. Describing a letter received by Bari, JN Mitra complained about the Managing Directors' "cliquish joy that the Union had no more hold over the workers", and of his insulting reference to the Union Secretary as a *chokra**. The letter was later referred to by the police as having inspired Bari's ire.¹⁰⁴

The management's refusal to provide loyal workers with accommodation inside the works led to a complete shutdown by September 19. Rakshit and Agarwala departed to make arrangements for shifting production to Bengal. Bari arrived for a short visit on the 24th, and after reminding the strikers of his numerous victories left for Patna.¹⁰⁵ 247 workers had been dismissed till mid-September, and another 800 refused employment.¹⁰⁶ Meanwhile Jaipal Singh helped employ new hands and Homi offered to mediate, enrolling 200 *Adivasis* in the Federation.¹⁰⁷

Prior to these developments, in July-August 1939, there had been a flash strike in Indra Singh's ISWP factory. The strike had become a *cause-celebre* for Congress-socialists and communists seeking to undermine Bari's position - it was his union which was compromised by the militants in this case. During this episode *Adivasi* strikers had been encouraged to return to work "very probably under the influence of Jaipal Singh".¹⁰⁸ In this instance his interests had not been in conflict with those of Bari, who had been upstaged by the radicals and wanted the movement to end. Bari's

¹⁰³ Some *Adivasi* workers were shouting *aa jao* ("come in") from within the plant, and the police warned the proprietor not to allow demonstrations inside the works: File 506/39. Strike Report 1 dated 19/9/39.

¹⁰⁴ File 506/39. JN Mitra's letter to Premier, 29 September 1939; and Police Report on Labour, 10 October 1939. **Chokra* means urchin or ragamuffin. "The Management wrote to Prof Bari a lengthy letter to get the union registered otherwise they would not recognise the Union. This letter irritated Prof. Bari too much and the actual trouble started soon after. In fact, the Union officials failed to implement the terms of settlement by not registering the Union in due time, the advantage of which was taken by the management and became the root cause of the trouble."

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, DC to Commissioner, 29 September 1939.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, letter of TFWU to Prime Minister, 29 September 1939. On 25 September 1939, the dismissed hands received settlement of wages in Court premises, which automatically weakened the case for re-instatement: Strike Report 2, 1 October 1939.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, Strike Reports 2 and 3, 1 and 6 October 1939.

¹⁰⁸ File 402/39. Strike Report 19, 21 August 1939.

influence declined after this affair and was further adversely affected by the political crisis of September and the imminent resignation of the ministry. The strikes of the past had expressed class power refracted through his political personality. He was now confronted with the mobilisation of ethnic identity articulated through anti-Bihari and anti-Congress sentiment under the leadership of his political opponents.

On October 2 and 3, over 500 *Adivasis* were escorted into the plant in the face of some strong picketing. Fifty Punjabi workers also attended work. Bari declared a strike, slogans shouted and stones hurled by both sides. A showdown was expected as police learnt that certain Punjabi *goondas* of TISCO and Tinsplate had been approached. On the 9th a thousand *Adivasi* workers led by Homi and Mangal Singh confronted five hundred men led by Bari in a Mahabharata-style culmination of years of hostility. Police mediation defused the tension and nearly nine hundred workers entered the plant. On October 10, abuse and indecent gestures were directed at the *rezas* by the striking picketers, and the next day TFWU officials fisted a JLF activist and abused Homi. Sabotage was reported. Loyal workers received advances on their salaries. A hundred Oriya workers, who had remained aloof now decided to enter the factory. The desperate Bari made the unusual gesture of placing his cap in front of his old supporters in a plea for support.¹⁰⁹ On October 11, Oriya and *Adivasi* workers complained about the abuse of women by "Punjabis of other companies", and warned of exercising their right to self-defence.¹¹⁰

The Foundry management had implemented selective reductions in 1938. Its new strategy involved the discharge of several hundred workers and (partly) shifting its manufactory to Bengal. On October 12 it informed the administration of its willingness to settle accounts with some 250 dismissed hands.¹¹¹ A confrontation was narrowly averted on the 13th when picketers attempted to turn back loyal workers.

¹⁰⁹ File 506/39. Strike Reports 3, 4, 5 and 6, dated 6, 9, 11, and 12 October 1939.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, letter, 11 October 1939, signed by B Mohapatra, with 77 sheets of signatures and thumb prints appended, addressed to the Sub Divisional Officer, with copy to Governor.

¹¹¹ Ibid, Works Manager to Sub Divisional Officer, 12 October 1939. "Besides these dismissed hands, there are 768 workers who have been absentees... and have not drawn their wages. We shall be glad to receive the names of the strikers, if any, amongst these absentees so that we can arrange to have them similarly paid..".

After this Bari admitted that the strikers were misbehaving, and the tension abated for awhile. The official's comment at this stage was perceptive:

It appears that Mr Jaipal Singh has now handed over labour leadership in respect of Adibasis entirely to Homi. It also appears that now the fight is not so much between Prof. Bari and the Management as between Prof. Bari and Homi. Prof. Bari's influence, however, is definitely on the wane and now he is not able to collect supporters and followers in such large numbers as before.¹¹²

The union pelted government with communications replete with phrases such as "Homi's Adibasis" and "Homi's Punjabis", along with complaints about the police. However, its links with government were no longer effective. The management refused on October 9 to meet Congress Parliamentary Secretaries KB Sahay and Binodanand Jha.¹¹³ Bari was absent most of the time and demoralised strikers made a desperate attempt at sabotaging electric cables on October 28. An ambush of the police resulted in nine arrests.¹¹⁴

It is noteworthy that violence and intimidation, much of it directed against the *rezas*, and some of it very likely animated by hostility towards low-caste employees, had characterized the behaviour of the strikers from the outset of the crisis. Four sweepers wrote to the management on September 21 complaining about threats and obstruction. On 23 and 27 October, some *rezas* were assaulted and sustained minor injuries - episodes which prompted a written submission to the administration by hundreds of loyal workers.¹¹⁵ The visible divisions among the employees permitted the Works Manager to claim that the troubles had been instigated and "no real labour issues (were) at stake." The management had wanted to close down the works he said, but had desisted when assured of police protection. The promised protection

¹¹² Ibid, Strike Report 7, 17 October 1939.

¹¹³ Ibid, letters by NC Paul, General Secretary, TFWU, to Prime Minister, 7, 10 and 11 October 1939.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, Report by DC., 31 October 1939 : "Due to Prof. Bari's absence the activities of the strikers have much lessened"; and Strike Report 8, 30 October 1939

¹¹⁵ Ibid, Sweepers' letter, 21 September 1939; letter from Works Manager to Prime Minister, 27 October 1939; Strike Report 8, 30 October 1939; and complaint by Nazir Ali and others, dated 27 October 1939.

had not been forthcoming, but the police had prevented the use of chartered lorries "although this would have avoided abuses and assaults on the women-folk." With transparent innuendo he now introduced a communal motif:

You know we Hindus do not like to see bloodshed, the idea of assaults on women shocks us to the core. As we did not get any response to our repeated appeals for help and the activities of Mr Abdul Bari and his associates have been on the increase and we cannot afford to incur any further displeasure of our patrons, especially the Railway Board of the Government of India.. we had no other alternative left than to dismantle a portion of our Foundry and are shifting it to Bengal. Mr Bari is not only Deputy Speaker of the Bihar Assembly but also commands great confidence of the Ministry and his violent speeches upset and embolden the poor illiterate men to indulge in lawlessness..¹¹⁶

On October 29-30, seven Congress provincial ministries resigned and the political situation changed dramatically. By November 4, there were 1400 persons at work. A thousand of these were *Adivasis*.¹¹⁷ The new Chief Secretary was YA Godbole, whose secret demi-official to the Deputy Commissioner on November 16 is a significant text:

It is now quite clear that the strike is fizzling out... While the termination of the strike is a matter for general satisfaction, it is to be regretted that the end has been brought about to a very large extent by the part played by Mr Homi in inducing the Adibasi element of the labour population to keep loyal. One of the natural results will, therefore, be that the reputation of Mr Homi with labour will go up tremendously while that of Professor Bari will go down in proportion and considering the past of Mr Homi the situation will thus be full of potentialities for evil in the future. It is, therefore, desirable that *something*

¹¹⁶ Ibid, Letter from Tatanagar Foundry Works Manager to Prime Minister, 27 October 1939. In a letter to the DC, the Manager wrote: "Mr Rakshit had to remove his family to Calcutta. It is impossible for any gentleman, leave aside women and children to live in this vicinity on account of the disgusting slogans and filthy language of the associates of Mr Abdul Bari": Letter to DC, 12/10/39. On propaganda emanating from the Bihar Congress, he added, "We are sorry that the 'Searchlight' of Patna, which we understand is receiving the patronage of our Government.. has not stopped making false allegations against us.. We shall be much obliged if you will take necessary steps."

¹¹⁷ Ibid, Third Confidential Strike Report by DC, 4 November 1939.

should be done even at this late hour, to enable Professor Bari to rehabilitate his position. With this end in view, I am directed to suggest that you should endeavour to bring Mr Rakshit of the Tatanagar Foundry Works and Professor Bari together... to restore general good relations between them. A timely hint may perhaps be given to Mr Rakshit that although for the time being the Foundry Works have gained their end through the help of Mr Homi, a time will come when Mr Homi's influence with labour may prove real danger to industries in general at Jamshedpur and in particular to the employers of labour. Professor Bari has, on the whole, been an influence working more for the wholesome development of trade-unionism at Jamshedpur...¹¹⁸.
(Emphasis added).

Labour and the Politics of Ethnicity

The complicated politics of the Foundry strike exemplified the interlocked ethnic, class and regional elements in Bihar's politics. It also demonstrated the patterns through which social forces, individual animosities and political calculations were articulated. Three broad axes of influence may be discerned: the personal/factional; the social/demographic and the managerial/political. An explanation focused on any one of these would be plausible, but partial. In addition, various modes of instrumentalisation were taking place. Management was using populist ideologues, who deployed ethnic and class questions (and each other) to pursue political ends. Groups of workers were using leaders to articulate their resentments at the work place. The strike manifested the antagonism between Homi and Bari and the factional interests of Nilkanta Das. It was an occasion for Jaipal Singh to challenge the provincial Congress which had "treated him shabbily." Although Jaipal Singh's ambitions suited the management and Homi, the *Adivasi* workers' response to him expressed the sense of ethnic deprivation among the poorest of the Chota Nagpur proletariat, and their especial sensitivity to the molestation of tribal women: this was its broader social determinant.

There was yet another dimension. Bari's habit of plain speaking had had a sensational impact upon labour-management relations in 1938-39. His use of earthy

¹¹⁸ Ibid, Chief Secretary's Secret letter to DC, SN Russell, 16 November 1939.

language to castigate his opponents may have encouraged his followers to indulge in abuse when they found themselves thwarted. The conduct of the *Adivasis* allows us to interpret the failed strike as a struggle between 'Hindustanis' and tribals, between foul-mouthed men from up-country and deeply resentful working women determined to teach them a lesson.

Nor was the Foundry strike merely a matter of 'worker's unity' versus 'communal blacklegging', even though the management's prejudices were obvious. Bari had himself helped break the ISWP strike a month earlier, and *Adivasi* coolies had indirectly helped him do so. The evocation of ethnic or class identities was a means by which leaders sent signals to the working population. Such signals were designed to attract a mass following. Bari worked with concepts of class and national unity, but this meant unity under his authority and implied control over Singhbhum Congress affairs as well. Once his political links obstructed class issues as they did in the ISWP strike, his credibility with the workers declined. This erosion was accelerated by the ministry's demise. The most egotistical of leaders were brought down to earth by the workers, the most passive of whom could express themselves by the tact of absence. The man who had humbled the Tatas and numerous English managements was worsted in Golmuri maidan by the ex-hockey player, the Parsi lawyer, and *Adivasi rezas*.

The responses of management and bureaucracy were significant. Drastic shifts in governmental power and in the calculations of managers and bureaucrats were taking place in an atmosphere surcharged with war and the imminence of political-hegemonic changes. After two years of watching Bari at work and despite the displacement from power of the Congress ministry from power, the administration was convinced that Bari was a more reliable 'controller of labour' than Homi, and wanted him in place for the turbulent period ahead (Bari was a known opponent of the socialists, communists and Bose). Along with Mukutdhari Singh, the Congress organiser in the coalfields, he could be trusted to retain 'moderate' union influence over the workforce in strategically important industries. Officials participated in conferences to arrange wage increases for miners and to prop up Bari's declining fortunes in Tatanagar. The state made preparations for air raid protection. Managers

were given extraordinary powers to punish trespass and union leaders asked to co-operate.¹¹⁹

On November 16 a dozen persons were seen at the pickets at Tatanagar Foundry. Although the police rejected the union's allegations of bias against Bari,¹²⁰ the Deputy Commissioner carried out Chief Secretary Godbole's instructions:

Mr Rakshit finally stated that he was always willing to come to an understanding with Prof. Abdul Bari and would welcome a restoration of good relations provided I could find some formula for this.¹²¹

On 6 December, 1939 a 'Round Table Conference' took place, presided over by BP Pande (the newly appointed Labour Commissioner) and attended by Rakshit, Bari and other union leaders. Rakshit was prepared to reinstate eighty of the five hundred and seventy six dismissed hands, and later raised the figure to a hundred and sixty.¹²² This was all that Bari could hope for, and it was no longer possible to prevail upon the government to withdraw criminal charges, which were reported on December 26 to be awaiting trial.

On 3 December, Subhas Bose arrived in Jamshedpur on a propaganda visit for his Forward Bloc.¹²³ Present at his reception was NN Rakshit in his capacity as president of the Bengalee Association. Rakshit complained about the plight of Bengalis in Bihar. Bose told him that his speech was 'like poison', and that Bengalis were the 'root cause of the subjugation of India to the British'. He announced his readiness to serve the cause of labour. The wheel had turned another circle. As Congress President, Bose had admonished Bari for insulting the memory of the TISCO Founder. Then it had been Bose who had spoken for moderation, responsible

¹¹⁹ *Searchlight*, 3 October and 14 December 1939.

¹²⁰ "He (Bari) usually comes and sits near the gate." File 506/39, Strike Report 12, 23 November 1939. "The real truth is that Bari is losing his hold over the labour": DIG's letter, 21 November 1939.

¹²¹ File 506/39, DC to Chief Secretary, 26 November 1939.

¹²² *Ibid*, DC to Chief Secretary 7 and 8 December, 1939.

¹²³ *Searchlight*, 7 December 1939.

unionism, for looking after capitalists' interests; and Bari who signified extremist postures, inflammatory language and imprudent leadership. Bose was now allying with Bari's enemies and the local opponents of the Congress on a platform calling for nationalists to provoke a final showdown with the British, if necessary in alliance with the Axis Powers.

On 4 December, Bose addressed a rally of 5000 *Adivasis* under the president-ship of Jaipal Singh.¹²⁴ In a speech critical of the 'Congress High Command', and suffused with militant nationalism he reminded the *Adivasis* of the struggle of their forefathers against the Englishmen. He asked them to join the Congress and help his Forward Bloc take it over. Jaipal Singh praised Bose's 'excellent captainship', welcomed his move to build 'a new team', and invited him to approach the Adibasi Sabha "to fill up the weak places with... better equipped players". In a reference to the Foundry strike, he denounced the behaviour of Bari's followers who had 'assaulted Adibasi women with impunity'. He announced that he ('we') had declared a "war against the reign of terror of professional labour leaders, who for the most part are Congress henchmen", and he demanded more employment in Chota Nagpur for the *Adivasis*, "the most ancient aristocracy of India."

As for the *Adivasi* workers of Tatanagar Foundry, we need only record that their demand for higher wages was rejected in December and that management also asked Homi and the JLF not to interfere.¹²⁵ Against the demand for the reinstatement of over 500 workers the Deputy Commissioner now reported the possibility of only a hundred reinstatements. With regard to the administrations' efforts to undermine Homi, Chief Secretary Godbole was pleased by a police report on 16 December that stated:

It is learnt that Mr Rakshit has given orders that none of Homi's lieutenants should be allowed to go inside the factory without his permission. The

¹²⁴ File 491-I/39. Verbatim report of speeches by Subhas Bose and Jaipal Singh at 'L' Town Maidan, Jamshedpur, 4 December 1939.

¹²⁵ File 506/39. DC's Confidential Report 6, 19 January 1940.

management is trying to gain over the aboriginal workers from Homi's side with the help of Mr Jaipal Singh.¹²⁶

The events we have recounted form part of the biographies of three important local leaders: Maneck Homi, Abdul Bari and Jaipal Singh and tangentially, a stroke in the canvas of Subhas Bose's life. However, the substratum of all these would be, not an individual biography but the history of the workers of Chota Nagpur with their complex inherited identities and the newer tensions of their proletarian status. The social predicament of tribal people made them an attractive resource for labour contractors. As workers, they became *Adivasis*, something more than *Hos*, *Mundas* and *Oraons*. Over time, the impact of industrialisation on the region became the spark for the Jharkhand movement. The episode of the Tatanagar Foundry in 1939 was part of a prolonged process of the formation and the unmaking of the working class.¹²⁷ Class identity was unstable, but its instability resulted from the very conditions that made it possible. Ironically the point of rupture amongst its workers signified both the assertion of tribal and feminine dignity as well as the re-appropriation of their activity into the program of 'their' capitalist and the structure of class domination. At the moment of disruption, they were cast once more as a working class.

¹²⁶ Ibid, Strike Report 13, 16 December 1939. This portion was marked 'interesting' and referred by Godbole to the 'Advisor'. He was underscoring the successful manipulation of labour leadership by the administration. Having used Homi, Jaipal Singh seemed to have given up his concern for the *Adivasi* workers in the Foundry.

¹²⁷ I am indebted to Bhagwan Josh for the discussions which brought out this juxtaposition.